Communion Meditation
HERO OF THE FAITH
Isaiah 11:1-4; Jeremiah 33:14-15
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Last summer, three sermons in a row focused on "Heroes of the Faith", persons whose words and lives have made a very strong impact, whose actions prove the truth and strength of Christianity. Some of you made appreciative comments about that series of sermons and so I am brazen enough to try another.

At least we can put a little twist on the summer series: this time I won't announce the person's name right off the bat and let's see how quickly you recognize him. It shouldn't be too difficult because he has had a profound effect on our contemporary world. You all know something about him. I'm sure many of you have read some of the biographies written on his life.

One of the most famous incidents of his career became the subject of sermons from many pulpits a few years back, during the most crucial time of racial tension in the south. Although he was a northerner, he had traveled with a group of people to a large southern city where they caused all sorts of turmoil. The incident that made the biggest news was when they went into the largest church there and completely disrupted the proceedings. Our man said many harsh things about the church leaders - called them hypocrites and liars. Refused to let the worship go on as usual.

Strange I should call such a person a "Hero of the Faith", isn't it? Do you remember who the leader was in that shocking incident?

Let me tell you more about him. I called him a northerner, and that's true, although to be precise he was born in the south. His parents were traveling at the time and he was born before they could get home again, for they really lived in the northern lakes region.

Our hero spent the first part of his adult life as a blue-collar worker. And then at the age of thirty, he started preaching. He was never ordained and the mainline denominations wouldn't recognize him, so he just spoke like a street corner preacher wherever he could assemble a group of listeners. He also did a good bit of faith healing. An interesting thing about him was that he was never known to preach from the New Testament always referred to the Old Testament. He was in and out of most all the little towns anywhere near his family home. Sometimes he was run out of town; more often people were glad to hear him. It was clear he cared deeply about people. He never stayed in one place long enough to own a house or land. Local authorities were often suspicious of him and it didn't help when he associated with the criminal-fringe element. He seemed to attract a lot of social misfits.

That business of disrupting the large southern church - that really drew the local constabulary down on him. He was arrested on a whole set of trumped-up charges. His friends were not influential enough to get him out on bail. Anyway, things moved much too quickly. He was forced into a kangaroo trial in the wee hours of the morning, just a few hours after the arrest, and then was executed that same morning. The authorities tried to make it look legal, but it was plainly a lynching.

Strange that such a man could be called a "Hero of the Faith". Strange, that is, unless you have by now realized I've been describing the life of Jesus.

Have you ever thought of Jesus that way? Born of humble parents while they traveled to the southern town of Bethlehem to pay their taxes. Raised in Nazareth in Galilee, the northern region of lakes. Apprenticed as a carpenter. At age thirty, he came upon the scene as a self-proclaimed preacher and teacher. He was considered a rabble-rouser by the authorities, you know. He was against the establishment, fought the system. When he

chased the money changers out of the Temple, he was disrupting worship in the most prestigious sanctuary in the nation. He associated with prostitutes and thieves, even with lepers and other outcasts of decent society. Most of the people who traveled with him were from the lower classes. And he wound up executed as a dangerous criminal, though his trial did not meet legal standards of the day. How strange that such a man would be considered, not just one of the "Heroes of the Faith", but the Hero, the Lord, our Savior.

And how strange that I could truthfully say he has had a profound effect on our contemporary world. He lived for only thirty-three years in the first century and he is still the most important figure in the twentieth century. While he was born nearly two thousand years ago, he is vitally alive now for millions and millions of Christians all over the world.

I have very deliberately chosen to present this material to you on this particular occasion, this first day of Advent, this Communion Sunday. We begin a Season of Preparation today and Communion is exactly the right way to begin it. But I am concerned that we continue this good beginning all the way through Christmas, and beyond. The question is, what are we really preparing for?

You are accustomed, I am sure, to hearing preachers bemoan the Christmas preparation that cannot even wait for Halloween to pass and emphasizes Santa Claus and all the commercial trappings. Worshipers have been enjoined to focus instead on the Bethlehem story and the birth of the Christ Child. The result very often is a pious concentration on a baby and a star and some shepherds with lambs in their arms. It is much too easy to stop there with a warm sentimental vision of a sweet manger scene.

The scriptures certainly do not stop there. Only in two very brief passages do we read about the Bethlehem babe. All the other numerous Bible passages for Advent and Christmas focus us on the mature Christ. Listen, for instance, to two familiar excerpts from Old Testament prophecy. They are typical of the scripture we read in worship at Christmas time.

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"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
And the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." (Isaiah 11:1-4a)

"Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I
will fulfil the promise I made to the house of Israel
and the house of Judah. In those days and at that
time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring forth
for David; and he shall execute justice and
righteousness in the land." (Jeremiah 33:14-15

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Both prophets were looking for God's promised Messiah, the Christ. That is the spirit of our own Advent observance. But the prophets and nearly all the New Testament writings do not focus on a birth. Instead they focus on hard reality. We just heard it repeated by both Isai h and Jeremiah: a Messiah of justice and righteousness, challenging and transforming society and individuals.

And that's the Messiah we got, a strong mature man who laid down his life to serve God's love and truth and justice. We got a Messiah whose resurrection proves the ultimate victory of that love and truth and justice in this world.

That is the reason why when we tell the story of the Hero of our Faith it does not come out as "gentle Jesus, sweet and mild". The real Jesus challenged, confronted the status quo where he found it false and unjust. If he had been content to preach religious platitudes and quietly heal someone now and then, he would have been okay. But when his preaching turned to meddling, and when his healings directed not just at individuals, but also at the sickness of society, and when he made public protest, then the establishment silenced him as quickly as possible.

Clearly, Jesus is not the Hero of our Faith because he was born in a manger in Bethlehem. If that were the main point, it would have been forgotten centuries ago. In fact,it was not until the fourth century that Christians began celebrating Christmas at all. Their yearly festivals until then emphasized crucifixion and resurrection. Clearly, if there had been no cross, no one would care whether there had been a manger. We celebrate Christ's birth because of his life and death and resurrection.

That's why I think Advent Sunday is a very good time to share in the Lord's Supper. In this sacrament we concentrate on Christ's ministry and sacrifice and victory. When the Apostle Paul wrote about how Jesus instituted this sacrament, he concluded with these words: "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes."

That, I believe, is what Advent preparation for Christmas is really all about: proclaiming the life and death and resurrection of him whose supper we share. It is a proclamation we do as we pursue his concerns for the hungry, the homeless, the lost, the lonely. Some of that proclaiming we have done recently through generous giving for the starving in Cambodia, the hungry on the East Side of Columbus. There is more to be done, including the Boat People of Viet Nam.

Proclaiming the real Christ means advancing God's love in our families and friendships, with one we encounter briefly across a crowded sales counter, with one we harbor anger against, with one it would be easier to pass by.

All of which means that there is a question before us during each of the next twenty-three days of Advent, and beyond: what will we do and say to truly proclaim the Hero of our Faith, to celebrate the coming of the real Jesus Christ?

Our heavenly Father, help us to be concerned about your Son's concerns as we prepare to celebrate his coming. Keep the requirements of your love and justice clearly before us. May we not allow busyness or even tiredness to prevent us from proclaiming that Christ is the Lord of our lives.

Amen.